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ABSTRACT

One of a series of six portraits of high school literature classrooms, this paper gives a detailed, evocative characterization of how one "master teacher" (Kevin Tucker) introduced, undertook, and guided the study of literature, focusing in particular on how the teacher interacted with students in the context of discussion of a literary work in class. The paper recounts how a teacher-researcher observed an instructional unit of literature by (1) conducting taped interviews with the teacher as well as with his students; (2) gathering lesson plans, study guidelines, and assignments related to the instructional units to be observed; and (3) making videotapes of the classes involved; and finally (4) writing a narrative account of what had been observed in the class and what its significance appeared to be. The paper describes an elective for juniors and seniors entitled "Literature and Politics," noting the teacher's remarkable consistency in stated goals and actual methodology, his very structured work in class while creating an atmosphere of total freedom, and students' absorption in the class effort. (SR)

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Being There
With Kevin Tucker

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Learning &
Teaching of Literature**

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Center-sponsored research falls into three broad areas: 1) surveys of current practice in the teaching of literature, including studies of both what is taught and how it is taught; 2) studies of alternative approaches to instruction and their effects on students' knowledge of literature and critical-thinking abilities; and 3) studies of alternative approaches to the assessment of literature achievement, including both classroom-based and larger-scale approaches to testing.

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Preface

Overview

The following portrait of a high school literature classroom results from a year-long teacher-research project planned and implemented by a group of high school English teachers from districts in and around Albany, New York. This portrait is one of six produced during the first year of the project, each of which is available separately from the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature. The researchers are themselves all experienced professionals, regarded by colleagues, supervisors, and principals as outstanding literature instructors in their own right. Each of them undertook to observe an instructional unit of another English teacher considered to be equally accomplished in presenting literature to high school students. A unit was defined as the study of a novel, a play, or a sequence of short stories or poems over a period of four to five days. The intent was to compose detailed, evocative characterizations of what particular and well-regarded high school literature teachers actually do in their classrooms.

Each teacher-researcher chose a colleague whose experience and expertise were popularly thought to be exceptional. The researcher conducted taped interviews with the "master teacher," as well as with his or her students, gathered lesson plans, study guidelines, and assignments related to the instructional units to be observed, and made videotapes of the classes involved. Each researcher discussed and studied these materials with the teacher during the observation phase of the project and with the other researchers in the analysis phase. Throughout the study, the researchers also continually reviewed their evolving interpretations of materials with project coordinators. Finally, each wrote a narrative account of what she or he had seen and what its significance appeared to be, preparing the account through several drafts, until themes and details emerged that seemed to the members of the project team and to the master teacher to provide an authentic rendering of the classroom experience.

Goals and Methods

The question directing the research was this: How do the best high school English teachers introduce, undertake, and guide the study of literature in their classrooms? Plainly, there are nettlesome prior questions lurking here: What does "best" mean? What are the criteria for excellence? Who gets to say so? What does "literature" entail? But the concern of the project was to find out what teachers who are perceived to be successful actually do, the ways in which they do it, and the explanations they may offer for their practices. The attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that might underlie perceptions of excellence were not an immediate concern, although the portraits that finally emerged of good teachers in action certainly direct attention to what the normal criteria of successful literature instruction are thought to be at the present time. Nor was the theoretically vexed question of what constitutes literature an immediate issue, though the texts that various teachers chose for their classes represent statements about what literature is thought to include in the context of high school curricula today.

The master teachers of the study were selected simply by appeal to local knowledge: The researchers, all veteran educators in the Albany area, asked themselves and others which local

high school English teachers have the most established reputations in literature instruction according to colleagues, supervisors, and students. There was no *a priori* critique of these public perceptions; instead, taken at face value, they were regarded as reliable indicators of the current, commonsense understanding of what makes for quality of instruction. The literary text that formed the basis of class work in each instance was the choice of the teacher or program involved, reflecting, at least as far as the project was concerned, the normal, current sense of appropriate reading material for a particular grade level in Albany-area communities.

The research question was restricted to focus primarily on how a successful teacher interacts with students in the context of discussion of a literary work during class. Hence, less attention was directed to activities such as reading aloud or lecturing on background information, for instance, except insofar as they set up and conditioned opportunities for class discussion. Nor was much attention paid to those portions of class time devoted to routine business matters, "visiting" before and after class, or disciplinary and other regulatory actions, except, once again, to the extent that they might affect the character of discussion.

Naturally, the question "What constitutes 'discussion'?" and the related question "When is 'discussion' going on?" were persistent concerns, by no means easily dispatched. Initially, the researchers were prone to conceive discussion in their own favorite terms, which for one meant little or no teacher involvement, for another involvement but not direction, for still another, lecture or controlled questioning interspersed with student responses. Eventually, members of the research group agreed that discussion was properly whatever a particular master teacher said it was within his or her own classroom.

Researchers and teachers agreed in advance on the units of instruction that would be observed. During preclass interviews, each researcher asked about the reasons for choosing particular texts, what the teacher hoped to accomplish on each class day, what she or he expected of the students, and what assignments would support in-class work. The researcher also asked about the teacher's views of literature, literary study, and teaching. Following these interviews, arrangements were made to videotape classes in which discussion would be a primary activity and to observe but not to videotape other classes in which lecture, reading aloud, or other business would predominate (during these sessions researchers took notes only). Interestingly, no classes featured more time spent on lecture than on discussing the text: student involvement of one kind or another was a consistent feature of the six classrooms. After each class, another meeting enabled the researcher and teacher to review portions of videotape, go over written notes, and discuss perceptions (on both sides) of what happened and why. The research group believed it was important to richness of perception that the teachers have the fullest opportunity to react to the tapes, comment on their practices, explain them in any way that seemed valuable, and react to the impressions that the researcher had formed of class activities.

Since there was no intent to evaluate or critique instructional practices or to view them from some other stance of privileged objectivity, teachers felt free to be candid about what worked and what didn't. Since the researchers were high school teachers themselves, they were able to display the perceptual judgment tempered by generosity that frequently characterizes those who have "been there" and who understand the obligations but also the difficulties of

classroom work. The researchers knew the teachers as responsible professionals; the teachers trusted the researchers to tell their stories honestly.

The researchers and project coordinators spent considerable time exploring the epistemological and hermeneutic questions that surround practices of observing and writing about complex human settings. Everyone acknowledged the necessarily interpretive nature of classroom observation, the influence of a researcher's perspective, the impact of a camcorder's presence, location, focus, and movement on what is seen, the selectivity and slant of field notes, the necessary but simplifying reduction of experiential detail to judgments, characterizations, and conclusions--in general the interrelationship between observer and object observed as it is finally constituted in the textual record of some experience. The aim was to achieve what Clifford Geertz has called "thick description," a narrative rendering of classroom reality, its ambiguities all intact, not a model, statistical average, or other purified representation of "what happened." The teacher-researchers shared a pervasive self-consciousness about interpretation, a desire to offer richness of detail in place of clearcut generalities, a concern for discussing "readings" of the classroom with the largest possible number of people (the teacher and students involved as well as the other researchers and the coordinators of the project), a determination to write narratives about teachers' practices rather than conventional research reports, an emphasis on "storyteller," "theme," "plot," and "character," more typical of literary study than of empirical research. In this instance, researchers and teachers collaborated to create stories of classroom life: their viewpoints converge and diverge in intricate ways which the resulting narratives do not attempt to conceal. The researchers are narrators who do not seek to render themselves invisible in what they write, whose voices are distinctive and important to the meaningfulness of the stories. The teachers and students are characters who come to life according to the ways in which they have been conceived by the narrators. Each story is organized--has plot--according to the themes that emerged for each narrator over the course of observation and talk. Following is one teacher-researcher's narrative. The others are also available as Literature Center reports.

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Being There
With Kevin Tucker

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When I thought about "being there" with Kevin Tucker, being in his room for a week or so, I had strange feelings that some mysteries were about to be revealed. As teachers, we rarely get inside each other's rooms. There is a sacredness about the closed door of a classroom that rivals the sacredness of the closed door on a family. You knock and wait to be invited because what goes on there is private, important, not for public consumption.

To be perfectly honest, I was immensely curious about what went on in Kevin's classroom. He has an "awesome" reputation in our small, Hillside High School, in which I am a relative newcomer. He is a veteran of 17 years, and the man-who-can-do-anything. At school, he runs the Student Government Organization, he was one of only three teachers to compete in the annual school triathlon, and he is the truly beloved wrestling coach. He's had champion wrestlers every year that I know of, and his wrestlers would do anything for Coach. Kevin also finds time to participate in community theater and to work out to keep himself in top physical condition. Kevin is visible and well-known: he lives in the community, his wife is also a teacher at the Hillside High School, and his daughter attends the Hillside Schools. This year Kevin was the recipient of the PTSA award for the biggest contribution to the community as a whole. Kevin's reputation has been built on long term results, the test of time, if you will--the toughest kind of test to pass.

The class that Kevin and I decided to look at together is an elective for college bound juniors and seniors entitled Literature and Politics. In our discussion of this class, Kevin said that he did not create the course; it was handed to him in a "blind draw" as part of his first teaching assignment at the high school. He indicated that his first years with the course were not the best: "There was no curriculum to speak of...there was a set of books. There were no guidelines...really no directions....As a first time around teacher, it was a little frightening because you are not sure where the course is supposed to go and I'm a guideline type person...I don't like to wing it a lot. So the first couple years were a little scary because the kids were probably smarter than I was. They WERE smarter than I was, no doubt about it. They had larger vocabularies."

Teacher and Text: Choosing a Critical Stance

Being There, Jerry Kosinski's story of Chance, a gardener brought up with only television and taken by the world as a gifted financier, is not on the usual book lists, and so one of the first questions I asked Kevin was about materials selection. In choosing for any particular year, Kevin looks at who is in the class and tries to match interests. He also "field tests" works by suggesting them to individuals for independent work before assigning them to whole classes. He told me that several students had very positive experiences with Being There in independent projects, and their responses to the novel contributed much to his decision to use

it this semester.

Materials selection for Kevin is an ongoing process, and the reading list is far from static. "If I ever get to the point where I say 'here is the perfect set of reading materials for Literature and Politics for 20 weeks,' I might as well pack it up and throw it away. I might as well roll out of this classroom and let somebody else start it." Kevin's strong desire to "keep moving" the materials in his class is an interesting one in light of the recent questioning on the role of the "classics." For a book to reach Kevin's list, it must be meaningful and interesting to the students he teaches; this interest is his primary requirement. But in addition, the work must, for this course, and in a way for Kevin's other elective course, Mass Media, bring questions to students' minds about the culture they live in and are reading about: "I guess the idea that I would like them to walk away with is a sense of how, through at least, let's say, the last hundred years, from the late 1800s to the present time, significant writers have used the politics of human relationships, to know that and feel comfortable with the notion that there is no absolute, that there are no absolutes, which, for high school kids, is often a discomfoting rather than a comforting feeling. But at least to feel comfortable in the notion that if they don't happen to find an absolute, that may be okay because, you know, to search for one might be in vain in terms of human relationships."

Kevin delights when the questioning occurs. Rather than giving reading check quizzes, Kevin assigns a general response paper to students when they finish reading a particular text: "What interesting perceptions have you had as a reader of this material?...Tell me things you have seen, mundane or simple as they may seem to you...What has puzzled you?...What has angered you?...What has pleased you?...Respond to the literature in a human way." One of his students, not a strong student but one Kevin has worked with before, often writes a series of questions about the text rather than a straight essay. Kevin mentioned this during our interview as a success story.

Kevin calls himself a structuralist. There are many different conceptions of what the term means. For Kevin, structuralism means looking more at structure than content of a text, analyzing parts as they relate to each other, and looking for explanations as to why those elements fit together the way they do. Near the beginning of the second day of this unit, he told his students, "Being the structuralist that I am, I simply cannot ignore repetition of images." He stays very close to the text in class. Not only is a majority of class time spent on specific references to the text, but several viewers of the tapes noticed that Kevin makes fairly often a cupping motion over the text in his hand, seeming to indicate that the text has something important in it.

I watched very closely Kevin's relationship with the text because it was a topic we have discussed often in the two years we've worked together, and--being very honest--I was prepared to disagree with his position. I was prepared to see a teacher married to the text, holding text as the object to be studied. I had the wrong impression. Kevin seems rather to stay very close to the text because the text is what the group is working on together. It is an object to be studied, but not because it is right or good or valuable in itself. The purpose of staying close to the text is to see what happens when one looks at the world, politics and society, from that particular viewpoint. I think Kevin would say that you have to stand in that place, "in the text," long enough to get a real sense of it, and then you know what you are evaluating. In a very usable blend, Kevin seems to use structuralist techniques to do a very socially conscious reading.

I'll talk more about the amazing consistency in Kevin's stated stance, what I perceive that Kevin does in class, and what students perceive later on. My point here is that Kevin is aware of and has consciously chosen this approach after much reading, conference attending, experience with students, and talk with other professionals. One question that we often raise when we talk about the teaching of literature is how much of what we think and do is done in an unexamined response to our training or schooling. How aware are we of our own critical stance? Of how it affects what we do, value, respond to in the classroom? Of how it affects what we choose to teach? How capable are we--or how willing are we--to accept stances other than our own? Kevin has done his homework and has chosen, rather than fallen into or adopted as gospel, his critical stance.

Teacher and Student: "Break a leg, coach"

Kevin used Being There for the first time last year with a whole class. That particular class had a very different experience with the book than this class had. Kevin told me that there were two fundamentalist Christians in the class who focused on the scene with the homosexual and the scene with EE, and that their objections to the inclusions of those scenes dominated the largest part of class discussion. Kevin was not thrilled with what happened with Being There last year, not because he feels that a particular reading of the novel was not done, but because the reading that was done by the group was skewed to the interests of a small percentage of the class members. Some of us may question why a teacher would allow this imbalance in a classroom. Kevin is truly committed and encourages individual, personal response to works, and to the effects such a democratic commitment can take. Kevin felt that students seeing that a text can provoke strong reactions, and seeing what can happen when some readers are intolerant of other readings was as important, if not more important, than his intended focus on structure and theme.

The difference between the two years in Kevin's experience with this novel is an example of one kind of puzzle Kevin's teaching, his interaction with text and students, posed for me. On the one hand, I was struck with the strong commitment on Kevin's part to staying with the formal elements of the text. For the better part of three class days, the class listed and examined mirror references in the novel. Yet, Kevin's students indicated in my interviews with them that Kevin's class represented their most unstructured class in terms of teacher direction. All of the students I interviewed, both formally and informally, indicated that they directed where class discussion went, that Kevin had little input into the content and direction, and that they were free to say whatever they wanted to say. "I don't really think he has set plans for the way he wants the story to go. He just let's the kids and whatever they come up with...take it whatever way it goes." Why this discrepancy? How could Kevin work both a very structured class AND create the atmosphere of total freedom?

Kevin's own metaphor for this was that he would act as "catalyst" to whatever happened between student and text. "I'm the catalyst...I'm the catalyst. If I do my job well in this course, by the time we reach the last major piece of fiction, I shouldn't even have to be in the room." The catalyst metaphor works if we remember that catalysts usually do not remain as part of the change, but they allow one kind--or a limited range of kinds--of change to take place. One student I interviewed used the same metaphor, so I had to do some thinking about it. The metaphor works for me in explaining Kevin's role in the interactions of his classrooms, especially in terms of his goals and the value he places on having students question texts. It did

not, however, work to explain the atmosphere that one student described as "person-to-person" talk rather than "teacher-to-student."

The metaphor that occurred to me, that helped me understand how Kevin could create what seemed to me two opposing atmospheres, was that of the stage. Kevin is an actor, a talented one--a believable one. During his classes, and even during his one-on-one discussions with me, he would often fall into a character and a role to make a point. For example, I asked him about grading during our initial interview. He answered by making me a student receiving an explanation about why grades were based more on class participation than on papers: "You have tremendous insight into the text, but you are not going to spend the rest of your life communicating through the mails with literary periodicals, getting anonymous letters back from editors responding to what you say, or from other second hand individuals. We're engaged in here in what ought to be primarily a verbal context."

In any given class, the mini-dramatizations are identifiable and countable. Kevin's best and most convincing role is that of "teacher." Kevin is "up" and "on" in the classroom. The effect: high interest and involvement. One of the teacher-researchers observed that we were unusually silent watching Kevin's tapes. One of the students in Kevin's class is a former student of mine, one who slept through many of the morning sessions. (Our district is on a rotating schedule.) When I kidded him about not sleeping through any of Kevin's, he assured me that it wasn't only being on tape that kept him awake. He said that Mr. Tucker is just too lively, and that the only drawback to class was that "it is disturbing my sleep patterns by not permitting my morning nap."

I admit that during the taping sessions, I, too, was hooked. I'd get so involved in the dynamics of the class that I would forget to observe. After the first day of the unit, I remember characterizing the class to my department chair as magic. I wasn't sure at the time even what I meant or why I felt that way, but somehow Kevin had managed to accomplish something few teachers did. Kevin has learned to draw on his experience with the theater to create atmosphere and mood. I hope that this does not sound like it was somehow fake or phony. I started this essay saying that teaching is a very private thing, but it is also very public. Doris Quick, my department chair, says, "There are 60 eyes watching you, and, baby, they know if you ain't doin' it." Kevin does it.

Theater is not the only experience that Kevin brings to his classroom; Kevin is also Coach.

Before I saw Kevin in action, and probably because I personally have never been on a sports team, I didn't know what it really meant to "coach" people. Coaching is not telling people what to do or think; it is using every available means to get people to do a kind of task as well as they can. It is the transfer of a skill.

The feeling that I was watching coaching came to me in the beginning of a class of Kevin's that I asked to sit in on before the actual taping, just to get a feel for what the class was like in its own setting. The taping was going to take place in the TV studio and I didn't know if that was going to make a difference. I also wanted to see a class that was not prepared for taping.

Before class started, there was an excitement, a waiting for things to begin. No dread here; no having to tear the kids away from their talk of the weekend. If anything, it was almost like the atmosphere before a match or a game--anticipation of action, of something that will be

decided or finished. When I look back at the tapes of the classes on Being There, I can see the same anticipation. Kevin's students watch him--intently. My sense of it is that they have learned from experience with him to trust him, that he will get them where they need to go.

Almost without fail, Kevin begins with the game plan. "I want you to....What I'd like to do first is....Let's get a handle on...." He tells students where they are headed by telling them the nature of the activity they are about to do and the reason they are going to do that particular thing. I asked Kevin about such direction in the interview because I know he has been doing a lot of reading about reader response and beginning literature study with the students' immediate responses to texts. He told me that he knows that students need some structured direction, especially in the beginning.

When Kevin gave students a game plan for the class and began "warm-ups" by beginning class by doing exactly what he said they were going to do, they felt comfortable, started moving, actively participated, and still felt, as I have noted before, that Kevin's class was the least structured they have ever had. Teachers viewing tapes of Kevin's classes with me commented that there was more student talk there than in most of the other classes we saw. One teacher said, "Kevin is getting more responses than he deserves." This same teacher also noted that there seemed to be more student-to-student response than he has seen in most classrooms.

During my interviews with students, I asked them if taping made any difference in how class went. All three students indicated that it did for about the first fifteen minutes and that after that, classes were "the same as they always were." So I went back to study the tapes to focus on the personal interactions in the class to try to see how and why there was so much student response. Again, the coach metaphor came to mind. Kevin would open a topic, introduce a "move" on the topic, and then "throw the ball" to a student. However, before he threw the ball to any student, he made sure that student knew where the ball was coming from, where he wanted it to go, and that the student knew how to handle that particular play.

For example, Kevin began one class by wanting students to change the point of view of an early section in the novel from third person to first person, trying to get students to visualize the imprinting of one of Chance's few memories. He said, "Picture this. It's right in front of you." Then he adopted the first person stance for two or three sentences. Then he called on Janet, a quiet and, from my observation, one of the least confident students in the class, to continue. She did, following Kevin's lead, and Kevin said "good job," at the conclusion. Kevin called on another student, Carl, to continue. I have never taught Carl myself, but another teacher who has watched this section of the tapes with me, did. She characterized this student as one who would have to struggle with the course, and she was apprehensive about his ability to do the task--and was surprised when he did it without a hitch or a hesitation. Another "good job."

Soon after this, students started picking up the ball themselves. When Kevin pulled together what Janet and Carl had done, Karen interrupted saying, "I don't think this works. Look at the next sentence. It just doesn't sound like something the Old Man would say to Chance." Kevin asked her to explain and she did. He complimented her on her close attention to the language of the book.

This interplay was not at all atypical of the five days. It seems that Kevin does exactly

what he says he wants to do: give the students a starting point and a way to work. He shows them that they can do what he is asking them to do. He calls on students who would be the least likely to volunteer to do tasks that he had shown clearly how to do, and reinforces the effort. This example leads the way for the students to take on the move and introduce their own variations, styles, and even critiques of it. Often this beginning leads some students to take the play in a whole other direction, their direction. When it "goes"--meaning that it brings some insight to the text, whether the text is an author's or an idea before the class--Kevin gives maximum reward. "Bingo" is one of his favorites, and the effect of a "team member's" success is visible in the classroom. Kids sit up and sit forward, open-eyed. When the direction doesn't go, there is not the stopper that occurs in some discussions. Kevin asks questions and while he asks, his voice remains up, interested. Then he backs away, still open handed to give the students room to respond.

Sometimes students will respond quickly and move positions, give the floor to someone else, or drop the subject. Often, however, I witnessed real honest-to-goodness thinking and evaluating right there in the classroom. Kevin would back away, as I said before, and do what so many of us can't--be quiet for a long time, as long as two minutes. (If that doesn't sound like a long time, take a stopwatch into any classroom and see what is normal.) And Kevin's students come back with responses that are theirs, that they've had time to consider, that they know will be given serious consideration.

For example, early in Day 5, Kevin asks, "What does Kosinski suggest by this next sentence? 'Only then could they stay in one's mind before being erased by new images.'" He waits a long time, at least a minute, for students to answer. Brian finally suggests something about long-term memory. Kevin repeats what Brian said, writes it on the board, asks the question again, then waits. He gets "constant mirroring" from Tom and "self concept" from Jack. Class goes on:

- Kevin: If we take all of the videotapes of these five sessions and erase them, did these five sessions ever take place?
- Brent: Yeah, but not to somebody who's as impressionable as Chance. That's the difference between us and Chance, more of a longer...
- Kevin: Oh, you do see a difference between us and Chance.
- Brent: Yeah.
- Kevin: That's optimistic. I'm glad to hear that from you...I was getting concerned, but that's good.
- Brent: I'm going home to my garden. (Kevin laughs.)
- Kevin: Go back to the rows of peas at Price Chopper or K-Mart. I used to love to watch those guys with the little machines...
- Brian: It's not as fun as it looks.
- Kevin: It's not, huh? I wonder why. Have you ever done that?

Brian: Yeah, last summer.

Kevin: Now there has been an opportunity for you to grow and be creative in that job...to perhaps develop some unique stacking techniques...What if you ever did?

Brian: They make you take it down and do it their way.

Kevin: Their way? Oh, so there is no...

Brian: See, I mean...it was interesting on this one case...there were these huge stacks of soda, like fifty cases, and I had to get two cases on the bottom. No, I had to get two cases from somewhere in the middle. Instead of taking the one right next to it, they made me take all these off and put them all back. I have no idea why....The logic wasn't there.

Kevin validates the Price Chopper experience Brian relates here with "perhaps Kosinski has touched on a universal truth here. He could have used a different image other than gardens and television, maybe? Store Managers? Price Chopper pea cans?" Discussion continued: Brent asked if Chance would need a VCR in order to have a memory. Karen noticed the inconsistency of Chance remembering all the Old Man told him earlier in the book.

I kept coming back to the coach idea as I watched this phenomenon. Everyone in the classroom knew the rules. Kevin would initiate, but that was not the purpose of the class. INVOLVEMENT on everyone's part, everyone's maximum effort, team effort--these were the clear purposes of each class. The students were playing and knew they were playing; knew that they were expected to play.

Kevin insists on involvement, not only with words but with his choosing participants and his rewarding of participation. "I think every kid should speak because I want to see them develop confidence in their ability to formulate their ideas verbally and to express those ideas to their peer group." Kevin told me that no student, even one who wrote terrific papers, would get over an 88 or 90 in the class if he/she did not participate in class discussion. I pushed for what motivated this decision because I felt that a response was a response, and that the form of the response was not all that crucial. Kevin feels that a student who does not participate in class discussion does not allow other students the chance to hear and challenge a reading that may be very different from their own. The student also does not allow himself/herself to go through the process of presenting and defending an idea:

"You have denied everyone else the opportunity of hearing your perspective...and that's part of the dynamic which makes the give and take of...the dimension of class...what I want it to be for the entire class, especially in this class...because we're dealing with political abstractions here. And again, if we are to arrive at any kind of an understanding of...if there's a truth, its only after hearing as many of the possible variations that may be present in this group of eleven."

And so I was seeing real consistency with what Kevin stated in the beginning as his goals and purposes in the unit, in the class, and in teaching: that students think for themselves

and that they also think about why they think what they think, that meta-cognition we seem to value in our students. I also was seeing amazing consistency between goal and methodology. In other words, Kevin not only chose texts that he felt would allow for maximum student involvement in examining their culture, he chose techniques that maximized student participation by first showing them how to get involved and then giving lots of room for students to practice or to play, depending on the student. In the example of translating into first person that I cited before, Janet and Carl practiced, Karen played; Kevin knew the difference, how to "coach" each student at the appropriate level, without losing sight of the class/team needs in the "meet-ing" with that particular text.

Two other points about this metaphor and Kevin's interactions with students before I go on to the students themselves and their interactions with Kevin and with the text. One has to do with practice and the other has to do with hierarchies of responses in the classroom.

Kevin's students have written homework for almost every class. As I said before, Kevin's students seem to do the homework consistently and to care about it. I have not always had the greatest success getting students to do either, and I think now that I know why Kevin does.

Kevin's homework assignments weren't fancy or creative: list the references to Chance's personality in the first two sections; find as many mirror images, literal or figurative, that you can, and so on. What happened with them was impressive. If Kevin gave an assignment, he got to it right away in the next class. It was the basis of class. One of the teacher-researchers asked me what would have happened if Kevin's students had not done the assignments because Kevin could not have had the classes he had if they had not. I said I didn't know because from what I saw, this never happened. Because Kevin relies so much on the homework, students get the feeling they are doing something important.

The assignments also made necessary repeated involvement directly with the text. Kevin often sent students back to the text to look for things, each time with a slightly different perspective. Again, I know I keep hitting this point, like a good coach, Kevin is consistent in giving them a clear task, showing them a few times how to do it, and then giving guided practice.

The emphasis on the assignments also seemed to provide a stimulus for further thinking. Kevin's classes would rarely stay on the literal task of examining homework references very long. Soon the reference in the text would suggest connections, reactions, interpretations to students: "This sounds like Through the Looking Glass....Remember that time in Ragtime...? Wasn't it Skinner who did all those weird things with his kids?" Kevin let these discussions go, encouraged the students to explore the ideas and where they led. When the momentum died, Kevin brought the students back to the examination of the work they had done, and again they drilled until they were racing down the court again with the next play. (I know I am mixing sports metaphors here, and that Kevin coaches wrestling, not basketball, but....)

The first string and the second string players were evident to me when I watched the tapes of the classes, and the determining factors of who made which team had a lot to do with the kinds of responses students made. Most of the students who did what we used to call higher level thinking--made inferences, drew thematic conclusions, saw connections with other texts and cultural phenomena--were first string.

Jack seems to be the gunner, and I was not the only one who saw that. The one day of the unit that was just not on plane with the other days in terms of life and enthusiasm was the day Jack was not there, and another student commented on it early in that class, although no one else's absence was noted. Kevin kids with Jack on a level that is more personal than he uses with other students. "You remember those days, Jack? Jack has a head start; he has his shorts on today." It seemed to me like locker room intimacy: pats on the back, rough-housing with an equal. Jack speaks very quietly, yet I never saw Kevin miss one of Jack's clues that he wanted to talk. On the fourth day of the taping, Kevin records without comment one young woman's reference to "veiled mirrors" to go back to comment on how much he liked Jack's phrase "biased mirrors." Every teacher has overlooked a comment unintentionally; my observation is, however, that it was never Jack who was overlooked.

One other thing I noticed was that Jack's speech patterns, such as not finishing sentences, starting in one direction and then suddenly shifting direction with a new beginning, are very similar to Kevin's. I'm not comfortable drawing any conclusion about this, simply that it was noticeable.

Two female students who always sit together, both of whom usually participate and one of whom often challenges Kevin's position, are also first string. Another male student who looks like Jack and speaks often is a fourth. A third male who doesn't speak often, but who seems to be pushing for his best effort with each endeavor, completes first string.

One male and one female who, in my observation, bring a lot of interpretive and literary experience to their contributions, and one of whom contributes often in class, start second string. For a while, I could not figure out why the responses that these students gave, matching Jack's I thought in insight and complexity, did not receive the same kind of reception from Kevin. Very often, they received the psychologically correct, non-committal "um." When this coaching metaphor came to me, so did one way of solving this particular puzzle: neither of these students was a team player. The young woman was "over-involved" with her art and didn't always get the work done on time. The young man often put his head down or forgot his book. Despite their abilities and their perceptions that they were contributing to class, they didn't do team behavior--and weren't first string. The last four, two females and two males, seemed to stay with Kevin's immediate task and not to venture far from the text. They also rarely volunteered, although none of them seemed unwilling or unable to answer when Kevin called on them.

Not everyone is comfortable with divisions in the classroom like this, but most schools track students, and we all assign grades, another way of dividing students. I wondered about the privileging of certain responses both to the text and to the class (or to the teacher) because it is one of the questions that we as teacher-researchers keep coming back to again and again. Do we all privilege certain responses because we have certain readings of texts? Can we help it? Can we ever get outside of our own readings? How do we get students to do their own readings and not privilege ours?

What I think I see in Kevin's classes is not a privileging of certain responses because they suggest a preferred reading, but because they are most consistent with Kevin's goals. Kevin's first string makes more possible than his second string the kind of challenge to ideas, "mind-stretching" as Kevin calls it, to occur. They open discussion, pose problems to consider,

bring in other viewpoints voluntarily. It was Jack who started one class by asking, "Is it ironic that we are discussing this novel while we are being filmed?" This same day, Kevin asked the class about the function of mirrors. Two reticent students responded that they reflect and that they shatter, but Jack suggested that people play with reflections; Karen had a reference to how mirrors worked in another text; and Linda drew attention to the question of psychology of mirrors. Much more of what goes on in the classroom seems to be student initiated because the first string performs.

The end result is a group (team?) feeling that they have done something together and that they directed most of the action. At the end of class, the results of the work of the whole class are on the board--the collection of notes, references, and discussion points. They all get the "nice work, guys" at the end of class. The other thing that struck me was again how consistent this effect was with Kevin's goals. Kevin's open acknowledgement of first string effort seems to be effective teaching. Those students know exactly what is valued, and that it is rewarded consistently. They really do learn from each other by interacting with each other--their words, not mine: "If I just read a book myself, I might have a few thoughts, just reflect. But then I go to class and there's like 12 other people who might have a totally different view of it, and when you hear those ideas, maybe you get a few of your own. You're not just learning like 12 times the amount you normally would. The amount just mushrooms." (Incidentally, this statement comes from a student I characterized earlier as a second string player.)

Students and Teacher: "He just lets us go"

One major question I have, and one that seems to be at the heart of much of the dialogue about the teaching of literature, is what happens to the students? How do they feel about literature and how it is taught? Are they given a voice, or are they trained to mimic what they hear? Where do we ask students to stand in relationship to the text? How much authority are they given in the classroom?

I was anxious to interview Kevin's students to hear, out of his presence, so to speak, what they had to say. I interviewed four students, three males and a female. One of the boys was Jack; I felt I had to hear the other side of the dynamic. Jack and the boy I characterized as first string/quiet came in together. Then I interviewed Karen, the girl who spoke often in class and who most often confronted Kevin's position. The last person I interviewed was Brent, the non-team player with many contributions. I tried to strike a balance between choosing students I had taught before and students I hadn't because I felt it might influence answers. I made several appointments to talk to the most quiet female in the class, but she was very busy and could not keep any of the appointments. This was disappointing because she was the one student Kevin asked me to talk to. He felt that he had somehow failed with her because she did not volunteer responses in class. I also had singled her out as someone to talk to because I was looking for her perspective on this class.

The overall reaction to the class in general, to Kevin, to the literature in general, and to Being There in particular was very, very positive. Jack called it the best English class he's ever had. Brent said, "one of the best Englishes." I had suggested Literature and Politics to Brent, and he said that the decision was certainly a good one. Karen said that she had signed up for Classics, and her guidance counselor just put her in this class anyway. She said she didn't fight the placement because she said that she had heard it was a really good class, and that she ended

up liking it a lot.

I pressed for details about why these students liked the class so much. It was interesting to learn that it was Jack's first elective. (Our students have to take English 9, English 10, which is broken into "Writer's Workshop" and "Form of Literature," and a half year of American Literature as juniors. The remaining three semesters, they take electives and can choose from things like Classics, Journalism, Theater, Shakespeare, Film, Short Story, American Novel, Satire, and so on.) He said the class was his most relaxed class. What he meant by that, I think, was most relaxed from teacher control because he went on to clarify by talking about the fact that students often have discussions themselves in front of the class, and Mr. Tucker doesn't interfere. He liked the fact that for the first time he saw students discussing and arguing with each other, and that it was not always a student-teacher dialogue.

Positive response to the amount of discussion and emphasis on the importance of discussion permeated every interview I did. I quoted Brent before in this report; he said that learning "mushroomed" from discussion, and his sentiments were echoed by the others. That's interesting to me because my sense of the class was that there was real investment in those discussions. In my interviews I asked a lot of different questions trying to get at what made the discussions in Kevin's class more valuable than other classes and what role everyone played in those discussions.

Tom said that Kevin more or less got the students going and then sat back and let them go. Jack said Kevin presented an idea to talk about, but that he never told them what to think. If he did present a position or an argument, it was not his own--and therefore, it was open for challenge. I interrupted here to ask what would happen if Kevin did present his own position and someone challenged it. Neither Jack nor Tom felt anything would change. Jack said, "His first question would be 'Why?'" Brent said class was more interesting because he didn't have to "follow Mr. Tucker."

I didn't have any question that these students perceived that they had more freedom in Kevin's class than they had had in any other. Kevin provided structure by suggesting topics or bringing in relevant information, but they were really in charge of where it went.

I was struck by the consistency between what students perceived and Kevin's goals, critical stance, and methodology. Kevin wanted to be a catalyst to get students to think, and that's exactly how they described him. Tom even used that exact word! "The teacher isn't an authority. He doesn't guide you through every little thing. He's like a catalyst."

Kevin said he was a structuralist who wanted to look at the frame on which things were hung. The students described what he provided for them as "a framework for discussion." Tom described it this way: "We always get off on tangents; it doesn't matter if it doesn't seem to have anything to do with the book. It always relates. Mr. Tucker always gets us back to the book."

Kevin seemed to want to "coach" students to think on their own by showing them how to do it. And it is astounding to me how the students adapted to, and even adopted, this coaching. I asked Jack to talk about himself in the classroom. He said the only time he was ever uncomfortable was when he wanted to say something "but wasn't capable of finding the words, especially with some kind of abstract idea." I asked then if he was aware of anything

that Kevin did to help him get at that abstract idea. "The most common way he does it is to take one side to the extreme to get you upset, to get someone mad enough to start talking." Jack characterized this technique as Kevin's "most effective technique." Tom echoed in that this was any teacher's most effective technique.

When I asked Tom to explain Kevin's effectiveness in getting discussion going, Tom fell into a portrayal of Mr. Tucker: "I know I'm being real clever and real smart and making you combat me." Here, he's not only describing Kevin's coaching technique that I described earlier, but he's doing it in the way Kevin did so often--adopting a character and acting it out.

Kevin's students seemed to be aware, too, of the role of some of Kevin's theatrics. When I asked if any of the students seemed intimidated by the constant emphasis on discussion or the continual exchanging and challenging of ideas, students seemed puzzled by the question. When I explained a little, Jack said that no one in the room for more than a day or two would miss Mr. Tucker's smile when he played devil's advocate. "When he does it, he smiles. I suppose it's possible to misinterpret, but...." Tom added, "Yeah, and when he does it, you get the feeling, 'I can't let him get away with that,' and so you respond."

Students and Text: A Healthy Irreverence

Kevin's students have a healthy irreverence for the text, and yet they have accepted Kevin's stance that it is the center of what they do. The students I interviewed characterized discussion as being totally involved with the text, but were quick to add that that included all the "side discussions" and "relevant" material that also got discussed: "We didn't discuss plot, character, setting. That stuff came up once in a while, but...it was more the opinions of the author, the ideas he brought up, what that made us think about."

At that point, I asked what was valuable in class, what students felt they had gotten out of class. Each and every one said "new ideas." Both Tom and Brent went on to be sure I understood that they were not simply borrowing ideas from other people, that the ideas came to them as a result of hearing the multitude of points of view from the class: "new perspectives you pick up. It's not someone else's. It just all of a sudden comes as a result of the discussion." Jack explained further that some of the texts they read, and he mentioned Karl Marx in particular, were beyond what he could do alone, and he felt at that point that he needed what the group and Mr. Tucker had to offer.

I puzzled over what Jack felt he needed from Kevin and the class because the class did not seem to ever conclude anything about meaning or interpretation. There was little discussion of "final conclusions" or "themes." I said earlier that I did not know what interpretation any particular student had of Being There. Even in the papers that I read, I did not get a sense of closure or decision about "the meaning" of the novel. (I did not get to read them all because of a misunderstanding of my needs.)

It seems to me now that what Jack indicated he needed was what Kevin provided best: some ways into the text, some ways of approaching and looking at what was there. Students in Kevin's class looked at how things were put together and what happened to them and their perceptions when they looked out at the world from the particular viewpoint of the text. There seemed to be an understanding that those perceptions would be different, and there was value placed on the difference and on the discussion of the difference. Therefore, drawing

conclusions was probably not done because the conclusions would not be universal. This procedure is consistent with Kevin's structuralist stance, as structuralists usually focus more on form than meaning per se.

Kevin states in his interview that he feels that there are no absolutes, and that the fact that there are none is disconcerting to students. Yet he suggests to Brent above that there might be universals. Is this inconsistency, or is Kevin playing devil's advocate sometimes, reminding students that they are presented with "universals" in literature and by our culture all the time, and that part of their jobs as readers (and cultural members?) is to question those universals?

Kevin's students seem to have learned to question, to withhold judgment, to avoid writing down themes in their notebooks and looking for "the answers." The value in the texts they read seemed not to be in some inherent meaning that could be deciphered or uncovered, but in what kinds of thoughts and questions that text provoked in the particular readers reading it together. This is very different from reading a classic for its universal value, and these students were very responsive to the differences. They liked the freedom of forming their own ideas, and seemed to be more eager to get involved with texts and ideas because their ideas were encouraged and valued. They also seemed far less intimidated by challenging texts, probably because they were asked to explore the text rather than "to get" the text. Texts to Kevin's students were not mirrors or reality, objects to be scrutinized, but were windows from which to view reality, objects to be used.

Teacher and Student and Text: Fictions on Fictions on Fictions

After watching Kevin, I am more convinced than ever that we as teachers need to see each other work. Being in that classroom raised many crucial questions about my own teaching and teaching in general.

A big question that came from this experience concerns the real nature of what students get from a class. What do they really experience or learn? What do we really want them to learn? I kept seeing Kevin coaching his students, trying to get them to "play this game." If they decide to play, what game are they playing, and what do they win?

My two metaphors for Kevin's teaching, acting and coaching, suggest an unreality. A play is not real. We as audience are able to participate only if we allow ourselves to enter a fiction, suspend our disbelief. A game is not real. An arbitrary time, place, and set of rules provide a structure for an activity that makes sense only in that setting. I got a sense of Kevin using fictions (i.e., his dramatizations) to create fictions (coaching the game of literature) to teach fictions (Being There, in this case).

I also got a sense that what Kevin was teaching was technique--how to play the literature game, roles to take in certain situations, psyching out best strategies by looking at how things are put together. Kevin says that teaching technique is his goal: "I'm not going to be there for the next 20 years. I want to build some confidence so that when the kid gets to the next book, he still hears the voice of encouragement in his ear, 'You're doing it.'"

Although Kevin never talked about this specifically, it seemed to me that Kevin's focus on technique had more far-reaching political and social implications than were immediately obvious. Kevin selected books because they would force different perspectives and different

roles if students were going to enter/play/interact with them. One goal of the course was to get students to think about the political influences on literature and the literary influence on politics. If culture and literature are not layers of roles, rules, games, and fictions, what are they? Is one of our reasons for teaching the literature of our culture the teaching of the roles, rules, games, and fictions of our culture?

At the end of the unit on Being There, Kevin performed an interpretation of the book, one that he said in the post-taping interview came from his reading about Kosinski's life and his other works. He began with the question of Chance's astounding lack of curiosity, his plant-like ability to absorb commands and contradictions without intervention or protest. Then he went on to tell how Allied soldiers rounded up German and Austrian citizens and brought them to concentration camps to show them what actually happened right in front of them, focusing on the paradoxical human capacity for ignorant detachment.

When I say Kevin performed this interpretation, I mean two things. One is that this section of class was exceptionally theatrical. Students watched--silent, still, captivated. The other thing is that Kevin made no claim for this interpretation to be more valid, more real, than another. He simply said, "Consider this...." He did not say, "This is what Kosinski meant," but implied that because Kosinski lived through the Holocaust as a orphan in Europe and that his other books describe parts of the experience, this was a possible interpretation. Then Kevin went on to describe our interment of Japanese-Americans during World War II as another example of human capacity for inhuman detachment.

I puzzled over these two examples, not because I couldn't see a connection with the book, but because I was looking for reasons why we teach literature at all. For Kevin, one reason seemed to be to teach some moves, some rules and structures of political life--and that practicing with literature was how one learned the game.

If this is one reason we teach literature, then what is implied by the literature that we choose to teach? Kevin chooses texts not because they present certain truths about life, not "the classics because they are classics," but because they ask readers to stand in different social and political places. As another classroom teacher, I had to question again my own literature selections. Despite any intentions I might have, what did the literature I asked students to read imply to them, overtly or covertly, about life, humanness, themselves, social rules, culture? How much attention do we pay to this effect when we use books because they are on the shelves or because that's what someone else taught last year? What are the implications of letting someone else choose our literature for us? Suddenly, book orders and curriculum decisions became an incredible responsibility.

Likewise, the question of validation of interpretation becomes critical. Whose interpretation carries weight? Whose even gets verbalized and considered? Kevin tries very hard to get students to try out interpretive strategies, but I don't know from watching what any one student thought about the book. I know Kevin's. And I can only guess that Kevin's interpretation carries a lot of weight with students. The fact of the classroom is that Coach knows this game better than anyone else. Isn't one of the ironies of high school teaching and coaching that those who know the game best aren't the ones who are playing?

It seems like a given in most classrooms, not just Kevin's, that the teacher's interpretations are going to have more validity in students' eyes than even their own. Because

this situation is so, it seems crucial that we as teachers know--really know--what our interpretations are. As I tried to see what was happening in Kevin's class and why it was happening, I raised all kinds of questions about how much I knew about my own interpretations of the works I had selected to be studied in my classes, why I had those interpretations, how much I privileged responses that came close to my own. What games and rules was I actually teaching? And was I teaching anything or performing my own interpretation, guiding students to see what I saw and then leaving the work, suggesting that my interpretation was somehow singularly right?

Watching another teacher work made me aware again of how many decisions teachers make every day and of how important those decisions are. In the isolation of our own rooms, it seems that we can lose sight of the nature of what we do. Kevin had such consistency, a real sense of the whole--purpose, materials, method. Coach really did know how to win this game. But what if the game changes? What if the kids won't play? What if they don't even come out for the team? What if the rules of the game are so foreign to their experience that they can't understand the rules? What if it isn't the same game at all?

Would Kevin Tucker have been able to have this class anywhere? No. Nor would he have tried.

There is no way to know what would happen if Kevin suddenly found himself in a school with a population of very different needs and behaviors. It is my own 12-year experience in inner city middle and high schools that makes me ask these questions.

Speculating on what might happen seems rather pointless, but seeing that teaching is not simply walking into any given classroom and doing some lessons learned at college seems truly important; especially, when the media is full of reports by experts who do not teach, bemoaning the fact that a transference of knowledge is not happening. In this project, I watched a teacher working very hard to get students, in an admittedly almost ideal teaching situation, to think independently, to read critically, and to examine what they read in some cultural context. Are those goals universal goals, or do we have another agenda in the classroom? What makes Kevin's situation "ideal"? Is it that the students play the game that we are prepared for, that we like? Kevin's students like the feeling of freedom to think for themselves. Is there much more to learn from them about what we really do in the classroom?

In the last moments of the last day of this unit, Kevin said to the students: "We didn't come up with any answers, right? I hope not. I wouldn't want to confuse you with logic...I'd just like to confuse you if I can. You walk out of here saying, 'What?', then I've done my job. Go home and watch TV." Kevin did his job on me. "Being there" with Kevin has raised many, many questions for me about what happens in a literature classroom, too many to tackle here, but lots to make me think hard about what it means to "be there" in the classroom.

Videotape Studies of Classroom Discussion (a series of reports). Six teacher-researchers, working collaboratively with university faculty, videotaped literature lessons of English teachers perceived by their colleagues to be outstanding. Subsequently, the researchers wrote interpretive analyses of their observations. Each narrative is available separately.

- 2.2 Teaching Literature in High School: A Teacher Research Project.
Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, \$3.00.

This paper develops the theoretical framework for the teacher-research projects, and justifies such projects as an essential part of educational inquiry.

- 2.3 Taking the Fear Away from Learning.
Ann Connolly, \$4.00.

In this case study of an all female classroom in a private school setting, Connolly describes instructional experiences that differ considerably from those experienced in her own public school classroom.

- 2.4 A Journey of Great Expectations: Charles Dickens Meets the Ninth Grade: A Teacher-Researcher Discovers Life in Another Classroom.
Tricia Hansbury, \$4.00.

In this case study, Hansbury discusses the delicate balancing act every teacher undertakes in accommodating the needs and eccentricities of a diverse mix of students while still attempting to reach them all with the same class materials.

- 2.5 Being There with Kevin Tucker.
Carol Forman-Pemberton, \$4.00.

This report discusses the subtle ways in which teachers size up their classes and distinguish among first, second, and third string students in the game of class discussion.

- CS 2.6 The Heart and Soul of the Class.
David Marhafer, \$4.00.

This report describes a teacher-researcher's struggle to understand why a teacher whose approaches are vastly different from his own is nonetheless successful.

- CS 2.7 Classroom as Text: Reading, Interpreting, and Critiquing a Literature Class.
Roseanne DeFabio, \$4.00.

This report explores one teacher's conviction that guided response to literary texts ultimately makes students better independent readers.

- 2.8 The Teacher as Mentor-Guide: Joe Allen on Antigone.
Doris Quick, \$4.00.

This teacher-researcher describes how the seemingly trivial or obvious questions students ask each other in a nondirected peer group discussion actually constitute a valid and valuable learning experience.